



BILLINGS GAZETTE

Billings MT 59103

Daily

JAN -9 2004

Superior Clipping Service

Glendive MT 406-377-6612

40 Superfund cuts Libby short

By TED MONOSON

Gazette Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON — Federal efforts to clean up sites in Montana that are polluted with toxins are being delayed by a lack of money, according to a report released Thursday.

Environmental Protection Agency officials in Montana told the agency's inspector general that they could have used an additional \$3.7 million last year for the cleanup in Libby and an additional \$1.3 million for the cleanup of the Upper Ten Mile Creek site.

"Funding was obtained for the Libby operable unit, but not for Troy or for the Libby Mine," inspector general Nikki L. Tinsley wrote in her report. Region 8 officials indicated that the Region could have used another \$3.7 million. The additional funds would have enabled the agency to analyze more samples to help characterize the site and to conduct a study to determine how clean the site should be.

Libby has been devastated by asbestos-related diseases that were caused by a vermiculite mine run by the now-bankrupt W.R. Grace and Co.

Lack of money also has delayed efforts to deal with high levels of arsenic, cadmium, and lead in Upper Ten Mile Creek,

which Helena and other communities use for drinking water. The toxins are left from a gold, lead, zinc and copper mining operation. Mining began in the area before 1870 and continued through the 1920s, according to the EPA.

"Region 8 obligated \$3.8 million, but the Regional Project Manager (RPM) indicated that an additional \$1.3 million was needed to clean up two additional areas and begin installation of an alternate water supply and treatment system," Tinsley wrote.

Lewis and Clark County Water Quality Protection District administrator Kathy Moore estimated that the Upper Ten Mile Creek provides drinking water for 70 percent of Helena residents. The city's water is treated, so it meets EPA standards, but other communities outside Helena drink untreated water.

"The water's pH is the same as battery acid," Moore said. "There are orangeish red deposits on the stream bottom, but the water is crystal clear because nothing can live in it."

Residents of Rimini, Mont., drink untreated well water that local health officials have tested and found to be "very contaminated," according to Moore.

The lack of money for the projects in Montana is part of a nationwide shortfall totaling

\$174.9 million in 2003, according to the report. The full report is available on the inspector general's Web site www.epa.gov/oigearth.

Several Democratic lawmakers who requested the report said the lack of funding represents a health and economic threat.

The situation is not likely to improve in 2004 because a massive spending bill that the Senate is expected to vote on later this month would cut the amount of money set aside to clean up toxic sites by \$7 million.

The Superfund program for cleaning up the toxic sites has become dependent on the annual spending process since a tax on polluting companies was allowed to expire in 1995. Because the tax expired the fund ran out of money provided by companies in October 2003.

Sen. Max Baucus, D-Mont., who as a member of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee helped write the law authorizing the Superfund program would like to see the tax reauthorized.

"Max is going to fight for funding for Libby and Ten Mile no matter what, but he is also going to push to get Superfund reauthorized so we have a stable source of funding," Baucus spokesman Barrett Kaiser said.